The Eastern Front and the Struggle against Marginalization

By John Young

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Published in Switzerland by the Small Arms Survey

First published in May 2007

Small Arms Survey
Graduate Institute of International Studies
47 Avenue Blanc, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland

Copyedited by Andy Mash

Cartography by MAP*grafix*

Typeset in Optima and Palatino by Julian Knott (www.julianknott.com)

Printed by nbmedia in Geneva, Switzerland

ISBN 2-8288-0081-4

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Established in 1999, the project is supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, and by contributions from the Governments of Belgium, Canada, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The Survey is also grateful for past and current project-specific support received from Australia, Denmark, and New Zealand. Further funding has been provided by the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, the Geneva International Academic Network, and the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining. The Small Arms Survey collaborates with research institutes and NGOs in many countries, including Brazil, Canada, Georgia, Germany, India, Israel, Jordan, Norway, the Russian Federation, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Sweden, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

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The HSBA project is supported by the Global Peace and Security Fund at Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada and the UK Government Global Conflict Prevention Pool.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

BC	Beja Congress
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
DPA	Darfur Peace Agreement
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPLF	Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front
ESPA	Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement
ESRDF	Eastern Sudan Rehabilitation and Development Fund
GoS	Government of Sudan
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
JEM	Justice and Equality Movement
NCP	National Congress Party
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NIF	National Islamic Front
PFDJ	Popular Front for Development and Justice
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
SLM/A	Sudan Liberation Movement/Army
SPLM/A	Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement/Army
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNMIS	United Nations Mission in Sudan

About the author

John Young is a Canadian academic who first travelled to Sudan in 1986 to work as a journalist with the *Sudan Times* and stayed for three years. He then returned to Canada to complete a PhD in Political Science at Simon Fraser University, where he is currently a Research Associate with the Institute of Governance Studies.

Young spent most of the 1990s in Ethiopia as a professor at Addis Ababa University and doing field research in the areas of ethnic federalism, political parties, and the Ethiopian-Eritrean War. He then worked for the Canadian International Development Agency in Addis Ababa as an adviser on the Sudanese peace process. Leaving Addis, he moved to Nairobi and was assigned to work as an adviser to Ambassador Daniel Mboya, Special Envoy for Peace in Sudan for the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Secretariat. After working briefly, still in Nairobi, for the UN news agency IRIN as the head of information analysis, he took a position as a monitor with the Civilian Protection Monitoring Team (CPMT) working in South Sudan, and also briefly with the African Union Cease Fire Commission, for the next two years.

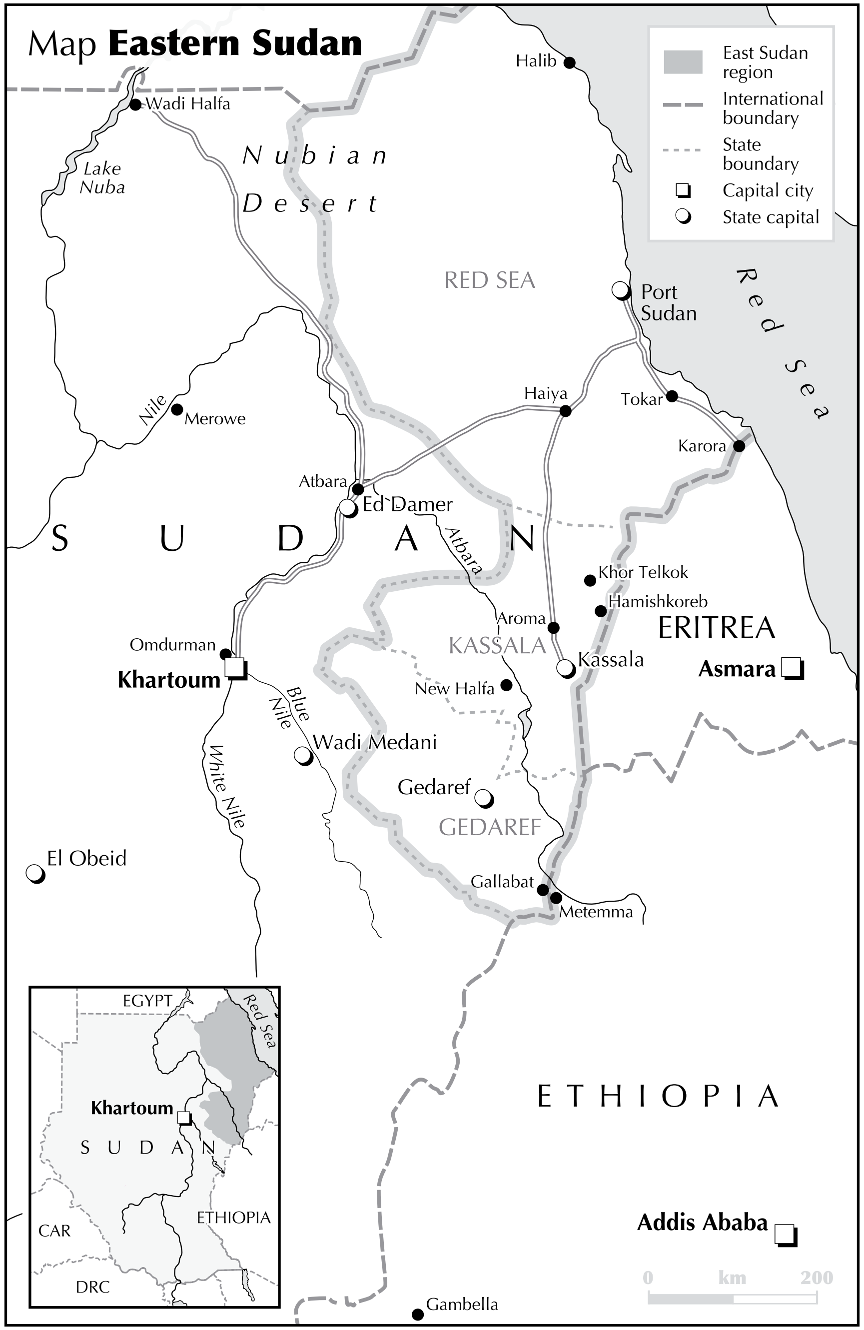
Since leaving the CPMT in October 2004 he has lived in Khartoum, working as an independent consultant and carrying out academic research in the areas of peace, security, and regional relations. Young has written *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) and published widely in academic journals. His most recent publications are on the South Sudan Defense Forces (SSDF), an analysis of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), a consideration of the legacy of John Garang, and a review of the regional security implications of the conflict in eastern Sudan.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to acknowledge the helpful and encouraging comments of Dr Sara Pantuliano, Research Fellow with the Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute, who is the leading academic authority on eastern Sudan.

Abstract

For years international attention in Sudan focused on the southern civil war, but the conditions of marginalization and resentment which motivated that conflict also existed in the east of the country. While dissidents in the south moved quickly to launch a rebellion and were later joined by western rebels, their counterparts in the east endeavoured to overcome their problems by political means. However, successive dictatorial regimes in Khartoum led Beja Congress (BC) politicians to move to Eritrea, join the National Democratic Alliance, and launch an armed struggle in the early 1990s. In 2005 the BC joined the Rashaida Free Lions to form the Eastern Front but weak leadership, lack of a clear political programme, poor organization, and dependence on Eritrea contributed to the failure of the military campaign. The Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement of 14 October 2006 calls for the absorption of the Eastern Front armed forces into the Sudan Armed Forces in exchange for political positions in the national government, the national assembly, and in three eastern states. The agreement, however, largely reflects the broader regional interests of Khartoum and Asmara and is unlikely to end the marginalization that led the Eastern Front to launch its armed struggle.



Map **Eastern Sudan**

I. Summary

Although the term 'marginalization' was popularized by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) in what became known as the 'marginalized territories' of Abyei, Nuba Mountains, and South Blue Nile (Young, 2004), its provenance can be dated to an earlier time and a different—but related—struggle. It was the Beja Congress (BC), formed in 1958, that first organized against the tribe's peripheral, or marginalized, position.

For the Beja marginalization meant—and continues to mean—the overwhelming poverty of the region; the government in Khartoum refusing to pursue development, or even provide basic services such as health and education in the east; and the government undermining local economies and traditional authorities.

Successive military governments prohibited the Beja from participating in the political arena and their campaign for inclusion forced them into armed opposition. In 1993 the BC joined the Asmara-based National Democratic Alliance (NDA), an umbrella organization that brought together parties committed to ending the hegemony of the riverine elite (the Shagiyya, Jallien, and Danagla tribes) in Khartoum and bringing about a 'New Sudan' free of marginalization.

The NDA did not last long enough to achieve its goals. With support from the US-led 'Troika' that also included the United Kingdom and Norway, Khartoum negotiated a separate peace with the south, leading to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) on 9 January 2005 with the rebel SPLM/A, which promptly withdrew its crucial support for the NDA. The eastern rebellion had largely disintegrated by late 2005 (Young, 2005). After efforts to build an alliance between rebels in eastern Sudan and Darfur failed, the BC sought instead to unify the peoples in the east. This shift from an ethnic rationale to a regional rationale for the conflict led to an alliance of mainly small groups, of which the Rashaida Free Lions was the most impor-

tant. The process culminated in the formation of the Eastern Front in early 2005.

Although the Eastern Front mobilized many people in the poverty-stricken east, its military achievements were limited. Moreover, with the SPLM/A gone and the NDA in disarray, the Eastern Front became increasingly dependent on Eritrea, and hence hostage to broader regional interests.

This study describes the origins and the rise of the Beja Congress (and to a lesser extent the Rashaida Free Lions) and their armed rebellion, as well as the process leading up to the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (ESPA) of 14 October 2006 and its aftermath. It sets the eastern rebellion in its broader national and regional contexts and provides a critical review of the ESPA, which ended the conflict.

The study finds that the outcomes of the agreement for the Eastern Front are mixed. In line with the ESPA's requirement that the rebel group dissolve its armed forces and end the military campaign against the government, the Front's forces are being absorbed into the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF). Although the former rebels gain positions in the executive branch of the national government and in the national assembly, the dominant position of the National Congress Party (NCP) in Khartoum persists. Similarly, the Front won positions in the three eastern states, but the NCP retains control over the security services there. Despite the NCP's ongoing control, however, the rebels highly prize the legitimacy and power granted by the ESPA to engage politically in Sudan.

Conversely, the ESPA leaves the NCP in a strong position. The agreement ended the military threat posed by the Eastern Front and Eritrea in the east, increased the NCP's legitimacy abroad, freed up troops that can be used in Darfur, and enhanced its relations with the Government of Eritrea. The NCP also controls the four-year USD 600 million development fund for the eastern region provided for in the agreement.

Eritrea is the other beneficiary of the ESPA. By mediating the agreement, it has increased its regional standing and improved relations with the government in Khartoum—thus permitting the joint border between Eritrea and Sudan to be reopened. It also reduced the threat posed by SAF-supported Eritrean dissidents, ended its encirclement by Sudan, Ethiopia, and Yemen, and initially appeared to place itself in a favourable position to lead the next round of negotiations on Darfur. These achievements represent a complete change in fortunes for a government that was until recently extremely vulnerable to threats from its neighbours—especially Ethiopia.

The ESPA will not, in itself, end the marginalization of eastern Sudan. Although the rebels have finally earned the right to operate freely as a political party, the NCP remains firmly in control of national and regional politics. The goal for the opposition will now be to unseat the NCP in the elections promised in the CPA—if they take place.

II. Land and people

Stretching from the Nile to the Red Sea, host to Sudan's only ports and the road, rail, and oil pipeline links to them, and situated adjacent to Eritrea and Ethiopia, eastern Sudan's strategic location has had a significant effect on its recent history, including on the causes, conduct, and resolution of the rebellion against Khartoum.

Eastern Sudan is a frontier three times over: first, it is a geographical frontier between the flatlands and deserts and the rugged mountainous terrain of western Eritrea and Ethiopia; second, it is a cultural frontier that marks the eastern limits of Islam and the beginning of the Orthodox Christian societies of highland Eritrea and Ethiopia; and, third, it is an economic frontier between the pastoralism in the lowlands and the intensive cultivation in the highlands. While its isolation and the fierce opposition of the Beja to intrusion into their lands limited government control and gave rise to extensive *shifta* (bandit) activity, access to the territory through the Red Sea also brought foreign invaders from as far away as Europe. Immediately before the British conquest, the east was largely controlled by the Mahdyia regime and its local representative, Osman Digna, a Beja.

The three states of eastern Sudan—Red Sea, Kassala, and Gedaref—together have a population of approximately 3.7 million, of which the Beja are estimated to number about half (World Bank, 2003). Red Sea state is thought to have a population of 800,000, most of whom live in the capital Port Sudan. Kassala state has a population of 1.5 million, and Gedaref state approximately 1.8 million. Tribally, the Beja form the largest group in Red Sea state and their numbers steadily decrease moving south to about 20 per cent of the population in Gedaref. The level of extreme poverty follows the same pattern: the Red Sea suffers the most, followed by Kassala, and then Gedaref. According to a household survey conducted by the World Food Programme, per capita income in Red Sea state was only USD 93 in 2004, considerably below the national average (World Food Programme, 2005).

Precipitation is so limited in Red Sea state that it largely precludes rain-fed agriculture. Rainfall increases moving south but, in most cases, it must be supplemented by irrigation schemes in order to achieve successful results. As a result of the limited precipitation and the poor quality of the soils, pastoralism has dominated economic activity in eastern Sudan for many years, and this remains the case today. After the last major drought, in 1984–85, many pastoralists migrated to urban centres, losing their land in the process. Those who remain have turned increasingly to producing charcoal to meet the rising demands of consumers in the towns, which causes deforestation (World Food Programme, 2005).

Eastern Sudan is host to a wide variety of peoples but the Beja are the largest group. Although highly decentralized throughout the east, the Beja share a common language—*TuBedawiye*, a Cushitic idiom—and a common segmentary structure, whereby each lineage is linked to the common ownership and use of land (Pantuliano, 2005). The Beja are an ancient people and have maintained a distinct culture and language despite having mixed for centuries with various groups that migrated to the region. The three main tribal groups that make up the Beja are the Bishariyyn, the Amara and the Hadendowa. There is some debate about whether a fourth group, the Beni Amer, can also be considered Beja since most of them speak *Tigre*, a Semitic language related to Tigrinya and Amharic, and they have a different social structure based on a caste system (World Food Programme, 2005).

The Rashaida, an Arab pastoralist tribe that migrated from the Arabian Gulf to Sudan in the mid-19th century, are mostly found in Kassala state, although their migration takes them north to the Egyptian border. They are relatively wealthy and tend to be viewed as aloof by the Beja and other Sudanese groups. Although acknowledged to be highly skilled traders, even if they are sometimes involved in smuggling across the Eritrean and Egyptian borders and the Red Sea, they suffer insecurity because of their lack of land rights (International Crisis Group, 2006).

Other pastoralists from West Africa and Darfur have moved to the east in more recent times. Nubians were forcibly transferred from their traditional homeland in northern Sudan to New Halfa, west of Kassala, in the wake of

the construction of the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s. The Shukrya, an Arab tribe, inhabits parts of Gedaref state together with Massalit farmers and other Darfurians, most of whom are employed on the large commercial agricultural schemes there and in New Halfa. People from central Sudan also live in the east in small numbers and most hold positions in trade and government. Because of war in their areas, there are also displaced people from the Nuba Mountains and southern Sudan, as well as more recent migrants fleeing conflict in the west.

The population of eastern Sudan is overwhelmingly Muslim, but the religion is of a highly local character intimately interwoven with a host of tribal and other belief systems. A large proportion of the people in the region belong to the Khatimiya sect, which in turn is linked to the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)—historically the leading party in the region. Not all those affiliated with the Khatimiya support the DUP but, historically, the link has been strong and both organizations are led by Osman Al-Mirghani. Relations between the DUP and the Eastern Front are very competitive. The DUP was seriously weakened by its poor performance in the 1986–89 ruling coalition, and by the subsequent efforts of the NCP to undermine it. As a result, the BC and the Eastern Front gained in stature in the region.

III. The roots of marginalization and armed struggle in the east

Presidential Adviser Dr Ghazi Salahdien once famously said that the marginalized territories of Sudan begin 20 minutes outside Khartoum, and thus encompass virtually the entire country.[1] Eastern Sudan is arguably the most marginalized region. According to the 'Black Book', a study of regional political representation published underground in the late 1990s by Darfur Islamist followers of Hassan Al-Turabi, the east has been conspicuous since the time of Sudanese independence because of its political and economic marginalization. The Black Book argues that the east had fewer ministers and representatives than other regions of the country in: the central government; government corporations and quasi-governmental corporations; the military, education, and health services; and most other spheres. It also claims that the people of eastern Sudan have among the lowest levels of education and access to health services in the country (Black Book, undated).

From the time of the Ottoman Empire governments in Sudan have used the lands of the east for the benefit of the state and its allies and, in so doing, have damaged the local economy and alienated local inhabitants. Trouble began in the mid-19th century when large-scale cotton plantations were established in the Gash and Tokar deltas and farm labourers migrated from Turkey to work on these schemes. The Hadendawa, a component of the Beja, had their lands taken as a result and responded with guerrilla attacks that became more widespread and radicalized many in the area—including Osman Digna, the great Beja leader who would later join the Mahdi's revolt against the Turks and the British (Muddathir, 1986). The Khatimiya sided with the victorious British and were rewarded with lands in the Gash and Tokar deltas. This served to further weaken the livelihoods of the Hadendawa and deepened their resentment.

The British established a local administration in the east that disrupted traditional authority and imposed leaders loyal to the new rulers rather than the tribe (Pantuliano, 2005). After Sudanese independence in 1956 a regime was established that one Eastern Front leader calls 'internal colonialism', whereby the riverine elite—the Shagiyya, Jallien, and Danagla tribes—took up administrative positions in the towns and employed indigenous inhabitants who were fleeing the crisis in the rural economy.[2] The politically connected administrators also pursued mechanized agricultural schemes that further undermined the traditional economy of the Beja. As a result of these changes, a large proportion of communal Beja land in the most fertile areas of the east is now owned by outsiders. More recently, land owned by Osman Al-Mirghani in the Kassala area was seized by the national government when he joined the armed opposition in Eritrea. It has also been reported that Osama bin Laden purchased two-thirds of Hadendowa territory in the Gash Delta (International Crisis Group, 2006) but this cannot be confirmed.

Recent political opposition from the Beja arose in response to a number of factors, including the effects of famines, floods, and migration on the region; flows of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) into the east from conflict in and around Sudan; and deliberate political, cultural, and economic marginalization. The Rashaida, although subject to many of the same conditions, have a separate set of grievances based on events surrounding the 1990–91 Iraq-Kuwait conflict, which are discussed below.

Famines, floods, and urban migration. There are numerous reports of famines in the dry lands of the Beja but the 1984–85 famine stands out. Some 1.2 million people were displaced and an estimated 75–90 per cent of all the domestic animals owned by the Beja died. As a result, many Beja moved to the urban centres and did not return to their traditional livelihoods (Pantuliano, 2005). Culturally, Beja men idealize nomadic life; the city is considered filthy, unhealthy, unstable, and full of immorality. On the other hand, Beja women are more likely to associate urban living with advantages such as opportunity and liberation.[3]

The Beja also suffered disruption because of forced displacements caused by man-made environmental disasters. Nubian land was flooded in the 1960s as a result of the construction of the Aswan High Dam. As a result, they were moved to areas west of Kassala, which reduced the area of Beja pasture land—producing disenchantment that is still evident today. The Bisharien-Beja who lived in the north-western parts of eastern Sudan were also displaced by the Aswan High Dam. They were forced to move south and did not receive any compensation.

Dislocation, drought, and the destruction of pastoralist economies have forced hundreds of thousands of destitute people to move to the cities—particularly Port Sudan. There are few jobs in the urban areas and the slums have greatly expanded in recent years. Port Sudan was regarded as a beacon of opportunity because of the expansion of the port, but this expansion involved a shift to containerization and mechanization which resulted in a declining labour force and further discontent. Unhappy workers in Port Sudan have proved receptive to BC propaganda.

Refugees and IDP flows from conflicts. The people of eastern Sudan have been negatively affected by a series of regional and national conflicts. In the modern period, Eritrea's war of independence, which began in 1961 and lasted 30 years, stands out for the widespread economic damage and dislocation visited on the people of the east. Hundreds of thousands of refugees fled across the border, thus deepening their destitution and insecurity and placing heavy demands on a fragile physical environment. After the collapse of the Haile-Selassie regime in 1974 and the rise of the *Derg*, or military regime, opposition developed throughout northern Ethiopia, which in turn led to more refugees in UN Refugee Agency camps in eastern Sudan. At their peak in the late 1980s these camps held more than one million people (Pantuliano, 2005). The defeat of the Derg in 1991 led to a slow return by the refugees to their homelands, but the outbreak of the Ethiopia-Eritrea War in 1998 again brought an influx of Eritrean refugees across the border.

Conflicts within Sudan have also had unsettling effects on the east. IDPs from the Nuba Mountains and the south began arriving in the 1980s—and few have left. Migrants from West Africa and Darfur, sometimes en route to Mecca, have taken up positions as farm labourers on the large agricultural schemes. Although their number is unknown, a government minister in Ge-

daref state, the state in which most of these migrants reside, estimates that they make up at least 60 per cent of the population.[4] The people from the west have sometimes made common cause with the NCP's security services and this has caused tension with local people. In recent years the area has also witnessed a small influx of IDPs fleeing the conflict in Darfur.

Although armed conflict in the east has been limited compared to other areas of the country, it has also produced dislocation, insecure no-go areas along the Eritrean border, a drying up of capital, and inflows of IDPs—particularly those fleeing fighting in the Hamishkoreb area. The conflict has also led to civilian deaths and injuries from landmines.[5]

Political, cultural, and economic marginalization. As has been the case with other marginalized people in Sudan, the inhabitants of the east complain that government policies undermine their culture and language. Arabic is spoken by a minority of the educated Beja but it is the only language taught in public schools. At the same time, the sufi-based Islam that is practiced by the majority of the people is discouraged by Khartoum. People in the east regularly report that they prefer to watch television from neighbouring Eritrea where they can see singing and dancing drawn from their own culture to programming from Khartoum that does not reflect Sudan's enormous cultural diversity.

People in the east also complain that the NCP has not represented them fairly in outstanding border conflicts with Egypt and Ethiopia. In the Beja-inhabited Halib area in Sudan's extreme north-east, the Eastern Front protest that the NCP is not making enough effort to remove Egyptian forces from Sudanese land. In the Gallabat-Metemma area of the southern extreme of eastern Sudan there is another dispute over valuable agricultural land that has periodically taken violent forms, although in recent years the Sudanese and Ethiopian governments have endeavoured to resolve the problem peacefully by establishing a border commission that is currently working to demarcate their entire border. These efforts have not always been accepted by the local people, however, who claim that Ethiopian farmers are holding their land and that Khartoum is more interested in good relations with Addis Ababa than protecting the interests of local people. The Eastern Front has attempted to capitalize on both these disputes.

Some of the Beja grievances against Khartoum are shared by the Rashaida, their comrades in the Eastern Front, but there are also some important differences. While the Rashaida suffer from the same lack of development, including limited health facilities and schools, they have the financial resources to purchase these services. It was the events surrounding the 1990–91 Gulf War and its aftermath that mobilized Rashaida sentiment against Khartoum. Sudan sided with Iraq in the conflict but the Sudanese Rashaida joined the United Arab Emirates in supporting Kuwait. At the end of the war Kuwait rewarded the Rashaida with some 400 vehicles, but these were confiscated by the national government.[6] The Rashaida considered the confiscation of their vehicles to be theft and a threat to their livelihood, and their anger became critical to the efforts of Mabrouk Salim—a former DUP member of the Sudanese parliament, a chief, and a wealthy trader—to mobilize the community in opposition to the government. In 1999 the Rashaida Free Lions was established with the strong support of the Eritrean government.

IV. The rise of the Beja Congress and the Rashaida Free Lions

The BC was established in Port Sudan in 1958 to protest against the tribe's poverty, its lack of development, and attempts by Khartoum to undermine indigenous culture. Like the dissidents to the south, the BC called for the introduction of a federal system with strong regional autonomy as a way of ending their lack of representation in Khartoum. It was also critical of the Mirghani-led DUP, which claimed to be the party of the east, but which the BC felt had done little for the region.

The democratic route to political change was first closed in 1960—two years into the military junta of General Ibrahim Abboud, who banned the BC and all other political parties. The parties were again permitted to operate after the so-called October Revolution of 1964, which brought popular rule back to the country. In the democratic elections of 1965 the BC gained nine seats but this parliamentary government was also overthrown and General Jafir Nimiri came to power and again banned political parties. The BC joined other opposition parties, most notably the Umma Party, in an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the regime in 1976 from bases in Libya. The popular uprising of 1985 removed Nimiri, leading to national elections the following year. The BC won only one seat—losing most of its support to a resurgent DUP, which subsequently participated in the Sadig Al-Mahdi-led coalition government of 1986–89. When the coalition government was overthrown in 1989 by Omar Bashir and Hassan Al-Turabi, political parties, including the BC, were banned once again.

In the same year the NDA was established in Asmara. The NDA began as a grouping of opposition political parties led by the Umma and the DUP. The SPLM/A joined in 1995 and quickly came to dominate the military wing of the organization. In 1993 the BC joined the NDA and, with the support of the Eritrean Army and the SPLA, it launched a series of attacks along the Sudanese-Eritrean frontier.

The attacks concentrated on strategic assets, such as the Khartoum-Port Sudan road, the oil pipeline, and the military installations defending them. These attacks, while successful, did not close the road for more than a few hours or stop the flow of oil for more than a few days. It was the pastoralists who crossed these border areas who were most affected by the insecurity and the landmines, which were used to surround the bases of the Eritrean-based opposition and the SAF.[7]

There was also considerable fighting in the Tokar area on Eritrea's northern border with Sudan. This became something of a stronghold for the party and produced some of its most prominent leaders, such as Chairman Musa Mohamed, Abdulla Kunna, and Salah Barakwin. Long before the outbreak of the war in the east they had supported the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) and its leader, Isias Afewerki, in its struggle for independence. This won them the confidence of the Eritrean rebels who after 1991 became the leaders of the government in Asmara.

Effectiveness as a fighting force

The NDA and the BC were not significant military forces, limiting themselves to hit-and-run attacks along the border which never seriously challenged the government. The BC fighting force did not number more than a few hundred at any time and was tightly controlled by the Eritrean Army. Heavy weapons, including tanks, were used in major attacks such as those against Hamishkoreb and Kassala, but they remained exclusively in the hands of the Eritreans or the SPLA. The BC (and the Free Lions) depended almost completely on small arms.

At its peak, however, the NDA (including the BC) achieved a number of modest military victories, which must be credited primarily to the involvement of the SPLA. The NDA—with considerable assistance from the SPLA—twice captured Hamishkoreb before finally holding it from October 2002 until April 2006 when the SPLA withdrew under the terms of the CPA, at which time the area was immediately taken over by the SAF. The NDA, again with considerable support from the SPLA, captured most of Kassala for 24 hours in September 2000 before retreating. The NDA and BC held parts of the area

around Tokar and a narrow strip of land running along the Eritrean border from Hamiskoreb in the north to Kassala in the south, declaring Khor Telkok their capital.

After the outbreak of war in 1998 between Eritrea and Ethiopia (the two major supporters of the NDA), the NDA and its affiliates rapidly declined. The departure of the SPLM/A from the organization following the CPA signalled its virtual demise and the remaining components became almost completely dependent on Eritrea.

The BC, however, gained a morale and publicity boost when security services from Khartoum were brought to Port Sudan to attack unarmed dock workers and civilians who had taken part in a peaceful demonstration on 26 January 2005. The protesters were demanding reforms to the port administration and recognition of the BC as the legal representative of the people. Two days later the security services attacked civilians in the Beja-populated area of Sheba Dirar, killing at least 22 civilians only two of whom were not Beja. A government investigation was announced but its findings have not been made public and many Beja in Port Sudan still feel aggrieved about this incident.

The BC was able to capitalize on these events to the extent that it subsequently organized a national conference in which Musa Mohamed Ahmed, who until then had been an unknown soldier, was elected chairman of the BC. Abdulla Kunna, a teacher, was assigned responsibility for political affairs and Dr Amna Dirar, a professor at Alfad University in Omdurman, was elected vice-chairman and leader of the internal wing. The killings also made clear how far the NCP would go to contain popular anger in the east, while indicating that the BC was capable of mobilizing the civilian population, and led many in the international community to fear that the violent and insecure conditions that existed in the west would be replicated in the east.

Expectations that violence would break out as the SPLA withdrew from the east under the terms of the CPA proved unfounded. A Government of Sudan (GoS)-aligned militia led by Suliman Ali Bitai attacked Hamishkoreb on 10 January 2006 but was repulsed by the SPLA, which did not leave Hamishkoreb until April—three months later than stipulated by the CPA. To the surprise of many, it appears that the SPLA virtually handed over the town to the SAF, thus leaving the BC with only pockets of territory and their 'capital' of Khor Telkok near Kassala.[8]

The BC's effectiveness has been reduced by a number of tensions inside the organization. These tensions have placed major limitations on the organization's overall ability to build and channel support, and continue to plague the political prospects of the Beja (and Eastern Front) today.

Modern vs. traditional leadership. Operating in a community that is highly decentralized and where there is a veneration of holy people and deference to living religious figures and traditional leaders, the BC has felt the need to make alliances with sheikhs and religious leaders and even bring them into its leadership, the most significant examples of this being Sheikh Suliman Ali Bitai and Sheikh Omar. Suliman and his family have held dominant positions in Hamishkoreb since its establishment as a major religious educational centre in the early years of the past century, as well as in a swath of territory parallel to the Eritrean border running from Hamishkoreb south to Kassala. In the mid- to late-1990s Suliman was a leading figure in the NDA based in Asmara and Sheikh Omar was at least officially the leader of the BC.

However, Suliman and Omar left the organization, returned to government-controlled Sudan, and signed a 'peace agreement' with the NCP in 2003—presumably on behalf of the Beja, although the agreement was never released to the public and appears to have achieved nothing. The NCP continues to see value in its association with Suliman, however, as was made clear by its willingness to fund and militarily equip a militia that he led. The NCP also supported the formation and operation of other militias, including that of Sayid Tirik, a Hadendawa nasir based in Tiney.[9] It is not clear whether such militias were genuine fighting forces or simply conduits for generous government handouts, as their critics have claimed.[10] In either case, the forces carried SAF-supplied small weapons that in most cases were never used. Their official responsibilities included defending the oil pipeline that runs parallel to the Eritrean border.

Unlike in the south and Darfur, the SAF has been largely unsuccessful in its attempts to create effective militias in the east. While the reasons are not entirely clear, it would appear that BC efforts to maintain tribal unity and their

refusal to sanction inter-tribal fighting are factors. In addition, leading families have endeavoured to maintain their attachments in both camps. For example, while Suliman returned to Sudan, his brother remained with the DUP in Asmara ensuring that the interests of the family were protected either way. About the same time Omar returned to the BC and was rewarded with a house and facilities in Hamishkoreb.[11]

The willingness of both the BC and the NCP to court traditional leaders, even when they appear either fickle or opportunist in their affiliations, highlights the standing of these leaders in the Beja community. The BC operates in a highly traditional community and such alliances make reform extremely difficult. For example, while the BC leadership espouses women's advancement, it has done little in this regard; Beja women remain isolated and have some of the lowest levels of access to education and health services in Sudan—in part because of the opposition of local traditional leaders. Nevertheless, women have an organization affiliated with the BC. As well as making basic reforms to Beja society difficult, alliances with traditional authorities also interfere with efforts to develop a coherent leadership.

Internal vs. external wings. The BC has also had to deal with a division between its external wing in Asmara and its internal wing in government-controlled Sudan. It is unclear whether this division produced ideological differences, but the split clearly led to organizational difficulties. Members of the external wing risked arrest and even execution if they return to Sudan, while members of the internal wing were frequently stopped by the government from meeting with their colleagues in Asmara or even from travelling to restricted areas in eastern Sudan. Tactically, the internal wing generally favoured a more aggressive political approach, while the external wing emphasized armed struggle. It would also appear that the external wing was far more influenced by the Eritrean government than the internal leadership.[12]

Civilian vs. military leadership. Echoing the internal/external split, there is also a division between the civilian and military leaderships—a problem common to many liberation movements. In this instance the military component of the BC has largely been under the control of the Eritrean Army, and issues of military strategy, organization, training, and logistics were largely

out of the hands of the BC's military leaders. Complaints were rarely heard because Eritrean support remained essential, even if the military weakness of the BC was obvious. In 13 years of armed struggle the BC, and later the Eastern Front, only managed to capture a minuscule amount of territory, and this was only accomplished with massive support from the Eritrean Army and the SPLA.[13]

Tribal tensions. Outside these leadership problems, divisions of a tribal nature also reduced the effectiveness of the BC and the Eastern Front. The most significant of these is the position of the Beni Amar in the BC and, more broadly, whether they form part of the greater Beja tribe or constitute a separate tribe. This problem has particular significance because the Beni Amar have managed to achieve a higher standard of living than other Beja groups and this is sometimes attributed to their closer relations with the government and its security organs. The Beni Amar are more likely than other Beja to be sympathetic to Islamist views, and this probably explains their greater affinity with the NCP and their participation in the NCP-supported Eritrean Islamic jihad groups. The vast majority of the Beni Amar live in Eritrea and the Beja have historically tried to keep them out of Sudan and to prevent them from acquiring tribal rights to land, although in practice Beni Amar now own considerable and expanding parts of Kassala and other centres. As a result, there is an uneasy relationship between the two groups and few Beni Amar have joined the BC.

Conflicting ideologies. Because the BC does not have a clear ideology there are often conflicting currents inside the party. The most obvious is between the ideological left and right. A considerable proportion of the leadership is made up of former members of the Sudan Communist Party or fellow travellers, including Abdulla Kunna, Salih Baraqueen, Ali Saffi, Amna Dirar, and Mohammed Mutasim. Others in the BC, particularly among its mass base, are very conservative and even sympathetic to notions of Islamic governance. The lack of a strong commitment to a particular ideology means that there has been much movement between parties, especially between the BC and the DUP. Recent efforts to promote greater party loyalty are having some success, but unity will always be difficult when pursued in the Beja's highly

fragmented cultural and political environment. In addition, after almost five decades of struggle and the failed promises of development made by successive governments, there is considerable disillusionment among the Beja.

Despite these considerable challenges, the BC has had some success in uniting its highly divided and locally focused tribe, encouraging a collective identity, and transmitting the now widely held belief that easterners are suffering from marginalization. Beja resentment and support for the BC is clear to anyone spending just a short time in the coffee shops of Port Sudan. The BC has been particularly successful at mobilizing young people—the student administrations at two of the three main universities in the east are controlled by the BC and the party is even making inroads in secondary and primary schools.[14] It is largely youth activism that has led to the establishment of BC offices in the major towns of the east in the past three years. This greater collective sense of identity is also seen in the decline in the number of violent clashes within the tribe, according to a medical doctor who has treated patients in the Kassala area for many years.[15] This growing sense of identity and collective resentment, however, is sometimes reflected in antipathy to the non-indigenous inhabitants of eastern Sudan, and this highlights problems not only for a regionally defined Eastern Front, but also for post-conflict reconciliation.

While the BC sometimes appears to suffer from having too many leaders, the Rashaida Free Lions remain in the unchallenged hands of Mabrouk Salim. Because he created and leads the Free Lions virtually alone, the group does not have a wide basis of support in the broader Rashaida community—much less a supportive network in Sudan. Because of their relative isolation in the country, many Rashaida have attempted to stay out of the political fray or simply sided with the NCP. As a political organization the Free Lions is little more than a shell, while its armed component is not believed to number more than a few hundred. It, too, has been supplied by the Eritrean Army with small arms. However, this small force is widely respected for its mountaineering, navigational, and shooting skills, all of which are probably derived from smuggling activities along the Eritrean-Sudanese border. Their success in trade and business also provides a ready means to fund the Free Lions and it would appear that all these activities are intimately linked. More importantly, Mabrouk and his Free Lions have the strong support of the Eritrean government and the Eritrean Army.

V. The Eastern Front

Finding themselves virtually alone after the disintegration of the NDA and the departure of the SPLA, and wanting to capitalize on the Port Sudan demonstrations, the BC and the Rashaida Free Lions announced the formation of the Eastern Front in Asmara in February 2005. It was in many ways a strange alliance. The Rashaida are Arab, wealthy, and relatively recent migrants to Sudan, while the Beja are African, poor, and indigenous to the region. More problematically, the Beja have long claimed exclusive rights to land in eastern Sudan, while the Rashaida have appealed to successive governments in Khartoum for a *nazir* (an appointed tribal chief) that would acknowledge they had land rights as well.

The Eastern Front was established in the first instance because both the BC and the Free Lions shared the same resentment of Mirghani's leadership of the NDA. These tensions came to a head after the Egyptian security services organized negotiations between the NCP and the NDA in Cairo in 2004. Both the BC and the Free Lions walked out of the negotiations, claiming that their interests were not being fairly represented. Two months later the NDA held its annual conference in Asmara amid considerable acrimony. When the DUP, the Sudan Communist Party, and Legitimate Command components of the NDA subsequently entered the Sudan national parliament in Khartoum, the BC, the Free Lions, and the incoming Darfur-based Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) were left outside. With the NDA moribund the eastern groups felt the need to create their own organization.

Although SLM/A-Unity and the eastern armed groups of the NDA might have posed a real threat to the NCP if they had worked together, the Darfurians showed little genuine inclination to commit to a struggle in the east. However, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), a smaller Darfurian armed group that was denied membership of the NDA because of its perceived Islamist orientation, did sign a memorandum of understanding with the Free Lions in 2004 and made clear its willingness to work closely with the eastern groups. It carried out or assisted with a small number of attacks on government installations in the east.

The establishment of the Eastern Front and cooperation with JEM, however, did not significantly improve the capacity of these groups to challenge the NCP armed forces in the east. For the most part this was because of the same problems that afflicted the BC and the Free Lions: weak organization, a leadership not closely connected to its support base or armed wing, the lack of a clear political programme, a failure to implement reforms in its liberated territories, and dependence on Eritrea. Although much energy has been devoted to undermining the links between the Khatimya and its leader, Osman Mirghani, many eastern Sudanese still maintain traditional ties. In an environment where the extended family, patron-client relations, and the authority of the local sheikh still dominate, it is difficult for the Eastern Front to carve out a truly separate space for itself on the political spectrum. To make matters worse for the Front, the NCP are experts at fostering divisions, infiltrating opposition, spreading disinformation, bribing, setting up parallel organizations (such as the Beja Congress for Reform and Development), encouraging tribal tensions (between the Beja and the Beni Amar and between the Beja and the Rashaida) and attempting to rally people around Islamic slogans.

Another major problem facing the Eastern Front is that, having set aside its tribal identities, the leadership must now construct a regional identity, which necessarily involves bringing large numbers of non-Beja and non-Rashaida from the east into the organization. The aim is not only to expand the size of the Eastern Front, but also to prevent the government from mobilizing these populations first. For example, the Eastern Front was particularly concerned to develop roots in Gedaref state because the Beja constitute a minority in this area and the Rashaida are entirely absent. Some Shukrya, Nubians, and others have joined the Eastern Front since its formation, but they represent only a small minority. Other significant communities such as the Masalit, which constitute a major proportion of the population in Gedaref state, have even less representation. Indeed, many people from the minority tribes in the east seem to be standing back and awaiting the outcome of the Eastern Front-NCP struggle before they commit themselves.

A year after its formation, and even after being made a signatory to the ESPA, the Eastern Front had no offices in Sudan or officials beyond a small number of leaders. Moreover, its formation inevitably raised the question of whether there was a continuing need for separate Beja and Rashaida organizations. Those calling for the dissolution of the BC first made their case at a conference in Eritrea immediately after the signing of the peace agreement. According to Eastern Front officials, the case was being pressed by the Eritrean government.[16] The proposal was roundly defeated. Many Beja argued that they would not break their attachment to an organization that has existed for almost four decades, and instead complained that they were not consulted about the formation of the Eastern Front.[17]

Another problem that came to the surface after the signing of the peace agreement was an internal dispute over the role of the BC internal leader, Dr Amna Dirar. Anger at Amna surfaced at a BC meeting in Gedaref before the agreement and it was decided that she would be replaced,[18] but the decision was announced only in late November by Abdulla Musa, a senior BC leader from Port Sudan. He and others subsequently met the national media where they accused Amna of taking party funds and aligning herself with the Free Lions leader, Mabrouk Salim, to displace Musa as the chairman of the Eastern Front. There were also allegations that Amna and others, including officials in Eritrea, tried to establish a separate Beni Amar breakaway organization.[19] Al-Amin Al-Haj, the president of the Gedaref branch of the BC, was also accused of this conspiracy. He was dismissed and replaced by Dr Mohammed Mutasim. Eastern Front officials alleged that a struggle for land by the landless Beni Amara and Rashaida underpinned the conspiracy.

Given the widespread and longstanding claims of corruption in the external wing of the party, the accusations against Amna seem disingenuous. How disruptive these events will prove to be is unclear at the time of writing, but they highlight the sensitive relations that exist between the Beni Amar and the Beja and the power struggles inside the organization.

VI. Regional security and eastern Sudan

What Cliffe has called 'mutual interference' has a long history in the post-colonial Horn of Africa as governments routinely support dissidents in neighbouring states and use these dissidents to pursue their own interests (Cliffe, 1999). Because of its strategic significance, eastern Sudan is a prime example of this thesis. In 1961 the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) launched an insurrection against the regime of Emperor Haile-Selassie from bases along what was then the Sudanese-Ethiopian border. This area has rarely been peaceful since. The Derg's support for the Sudanese Anyanya rebel movement, which came to dominate the south after Sudan's first civil war, encouraged Khartoum to reciprocate by providing assistance to the ELF. Sudan's first civil war ended with the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement and this initially led to improved relations between Sudan and Ethiopia. With the collapse of the agreement in 1983, however, the ELF, and later the EPLF, began receiving support from Khartoum, while the Derg—with enormous assistance from the Eastern Bloc—began hosting and supplying the SPLM/A.

After coming to power in 1989 the National Islamic Front (NIF) initially assisted the Eritrean and Ethiopian armed opposition groups operating from Sudan. When the EPLF and Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) ousted the Derg in 1991 it was hoped that there would be a new era of cooperative relations in the Horn. The EPRDF did force the SPLM/A from their bases in Gambella; and Eritrea and Ethiopia both espoused good neighbourly relations and took a leading role in peace-making in Somalia and Sudan. It was not long, however, before the NIF shifted its support from the EPLF and EPRDF to groups calling for an Islamic jihad in the two countries, and soon the border areas of Ethiopia and Eritrea were subject to guerrilla attacks from bases in Sudan (Young, 2002). Anxious not to return to war, Addis Ababa and Asmara tried political means to convince the Islamists in Khartoum to halt their aggressive policy, which had little hope of success.

The 'soft' responses of Ethiopia and Eritrea to Khartoum's Islamist policies were unsuccessful. The NIF under Hassan Al-Turbani was convinced that it was leading a global Islamic renaissance and that its neighbours to the east were ripe for an Islamist takeover (Young, 2002). Eritrea has a large Muslim population in the western border areas and the NIF began helping a range of Islamist groups operating in this area. This policy reached its nadir in its support of jihadist guerrillas who were defeated by the EPLF in the Sahel region in December 1993 (Cliffe, 1999). In Ethiopia the pivotal event was an assassination attempt against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during his attendance at an OAU conference in Addis Ababa, which the EPRDF believed was supported by the Sudanese Islamists (Young, 1999).

Asmara and Addis Ababa responded by supporting armed groups opposed to the regime in Khartoum, particularly those groups in the NDA that could provide security on their western borders. Asmara provided crucial assistance to the BC, and both Eritrea and Ethiopia assisted the opposition Sudan Alliance Forces, which operated along their western borders. Eritrea and Ethiopia not only directly supported these groups, but also used their own armies to defeat the SAF and turn over captured territory to the NDA (Young, 1999). These efforts were also supported by USD 20 million of military supplies from the United States to Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Uganda—ostensibly to protect these allies from Khartoum's aggression, but probably with a view to overthrowing the Islamist regime (Young, 2005).

These aspirations, however, collapsed when Eritrea and Ethiopia went to war on 6 May 1998. The two countries either ended or reduced their support for the Sudanese opposition and also began courting Khartoum out of fear that it would give critical assistance to the other. The overtures from Addis Ababa won out—probably because it was the dominant power in the Horn and Khartoum believed that it would overcome Eritrea—and as a result Sudan and Ethiopia stopped supporting one another's dissidents (Young, 2002). Meanwhile, the Popular Front for Development and Justice (PFDJ, the successor of the EPLF) resumed its former policy of supporting the opposition, while the NCP continued to assist Eritrean jihad groups.

After Ethiopia's victory over Eritrea, and its subsequent rejection of the ruling of the Eritrea Ethiopia Boundary Commission that it should return captured territory, Asmara began to support a number of armed opposition groups in Ethiopia. In turn, Ethiopia together with Sudan and Yemen, fellow members of the Sana'a Pact, supported groups opposed to the PFDJ. Officially, the Sana'a Pact was established to fight terrorism in the region, but unofficially it was an alliance to oppose the regime in Asmara. As a result, a number of armed groups, mostly operating from eastern Sudan and some from Ethiopia, as well as a political opposition, were given finances and military equipment by the Sana'a Pact countries. Eritrea was thus effectively encircled. Even more upsetting to the Eritrean government, the international community and the United States applied little pressure on the Ethiopian government led by Meles Zenawi to end its army's occupation of Eritrean territory (Young, 2006a). In the view of the PFDJ the United States had abandoned principle and aligned with the EPRDF because such an alignment was perceived as critical to US security interests in the Horn.

Eritrea thus faced two major problems: first, to end the region's encirclement which was both a security threat and economically debilitating because its borders with Ethiopia and Sudan were closed; and, second, the international community showed little willingness to apply the necessary pressure to force the Ethiopian Army to withdraw from Eritrean territory. Going back to war with Ethiopia was and still remains an option, but a second military failure could spell the demise of the regime. In this light, the government opted to work to end Eritrea's isolation and improve the country's status in the region—and improving relations with Khartoum was the easiest option with potentially the biggest immediate rewards. Eritrea had at least one card to play—its considerable influence over the Eastern Front. Resolution of the conflict in the east could not be contemplated without at least Eritrean acquiescence.

The problem for the PFDJ, however, was that the Eastern Front was among the most vehement critics of the CPA and the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA), arguing that they were not comprehensive and did not fundamentally change the balance of power in Khartoum. Furthermore, given the weak military performance of the Eastern Front, it seemed unlikely, even with Eritrean support, that it would be able to obtain significant concessions from Khartoum. Eritrea's dilemma was therefore whether it should jettison, or at least com-

promise, its long-term goal of displacing the NCP in favour of achieving a short-term peace agreement in the east.

Despite Eritrea's intense engagement with Sudan, the major threat to its security was (and remains) the Ethiopian Army. The primary goal of its diplomatic efforts in Sudan was to undermine the regional alliance opposed to the PFDJ, particularly the ties between Khartoum and Addis Ababa, in order to turn the tables on Ethiopia (Young, 2006a). This policy was pursued, in the first instance, by assisting the Ethiopian armed opposition; and, more recently, by arming and training the armed forces of the Somali Council of Islamic Courts in Mogadishu. Significantly, while the PFDJ supported the military wing of the Islamic Courts, the NCP gave assistance to its political wing. Although Yemen sided with Ethiopia in supporting the Federal Transitional Government in opposition to the Islamic Courts, the NCP's support for the Somali Islamists effectively drove a hole through the Sana'a Pact and ended the encirclement of Eritrea. The PFDJ may not have given up the option of going back to war with Ethiopia to recover its border lands, but it would require at least the neutrality of Khartoum and security on its western border before that option can be seriously entertained.

VII. Negotiations and peace agreement

The UN, the United Kingdom, and the United States were all proposed as mediators for negotiations in the east, but they were rejected by both the PFDJ and the NCP. Eritrea was proposed and, after initial resistance to the idea, the NCP agreed. Pressure from the Eastern Front and its former ally, the SPLM/A, carried some weight, but more significant was the view in Khartoum that the Eastern Front was controlled by the Eritreans,[20] and hence no agreement could be reached without its approval.[21] Against this background the first vice-president, Salva Kiir, the foreign minister, Lam Akol, and SPLM parliamentary leader, Yasir Arman (who represented the SPLM/A in Asmara for many years) made a number of visits to Asmara to meet the Eritrean leadership and, in turn, Eritrean presidential adviser, Yemane Gebreab, and the head of organizational affairs, Abdella Jabir, met with their counterparts in Khartoum. During these meetings bridges between the two countries were further mended and an outline of the peace agreement was probably sketched out.

While the negotiations in Navaisha and Abuja that preceded the CPA and DPA were long and arduous, the peace talks in Asmara were smooth and uncontroversial. While the former sets of negotiations were held in the public view of many observers and journalists, the peace talks in Asmara were low-key. International observers were not permitted because of the Eritrean conviction that such an intervention would interfere with the process.[22] Probably the most important reason why the negotiations went so smoothly is that although both the Eastern Front and the PFDJ had been opposed to the CPA, they did not challenge its stipulations, and in particular they accepted the NCP's dominance in Khartoum. Another factor explaining the rapid progress of the negotiations was the conclusion drawn by the Eastern Front leadership that, because of the loss of its SPLM/A and NDA allies and the limited achievements of its military campaign, it had no alternative but to accept the outcome of the peace process.

Following the format of the CPA and DPA, the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement, signed on 14 October 2006, focused on security arrangements, power sharing, and wealth sharing (*ESPA*, 2006). Under the security arrangements it was agreed that 'no militia forces or other armed groups would exist in Eastern Sudan apart from SAF' (art. 24). This provision effectively brought to an end the independent existence of the Eastern Front armed forces, a measure that the Front had previously argued that it would not accept. It should also signal the end of the SAF-aligned armed groups. According to Eritrean sources, the NCP pressed for an agreement that would have Sudan disband these eastern pro-government groups in return for the PFDJ agreeing to stop supporting the Darfur armed opposition. This was not accepted, however, and instead it was agreed that the SAF-aligned armed groups in the east would be disbanded within three months of the signing of the peace agreement.[23] Whether this has taken place cannot be verified without an independent assessment.

The agreement provides for the establishment of a High Joint Military Committee to implement and monitor the ceasefire, which is made up of three representatives from the GoS, three from the Eastern Front and one from the Government of Eritrea (art. 26), thus giving Eritrea the critical vote.

According to the agreement, the Eastern Front army will be granted 'no less than 33 per cent of their newly integrated SAF units for a minimum duration of two years' (art. 27). Eastern Front and Eritrean officials say that the Front will fill 5,300 posts in the eastern branch of the national army, with others going into the paramilitary services. There are no reliable estimates of Eastern Front numbers but the figure of 5,300 appears very high, although this does not preclude the possibility that, following the signing of the ESPA, sufficient numbers of easterners could be recruited and then absorbed into the SAF. The agreement also provides for the establishment of a Joint Committee for the Integration of the Eastern Front forces into the SAF (art. 27), and the GoS assumes responsibility for reintegrating Eastern Front combatants who are not suitable for membership of the SAF into civilian life (art. 28).

It is alleged that the NCP will endeavour to place the Eritrean jihad groups it was forced to disband into the eastern-based SAF forces, while Eritrea will in turn try to take the opportunity provided by the restructuring of the regional army to infiltrate its intelligence operatives. According to one informed individual, the result will be a war between the intelligence services.[24] Under the agreement the newly recruited SAF forces cannot be transferred to other parts of the country for five years, a provision apparently designed to ensure that Eastern Front soldiers cannot be sent to Darfur.[25]

Although Eastern Front leaders had previously supported the placement of international troops and observers in the east to guarantee the agreement, this was opposed by both Khartoum and Asmara. Eritrea alone is now serving as the guarantor of the agreement—without having any of its army in Sudan. This is in marked contrast to the CPA, which provides for some 10,000 peacekeepers and monitors in the south, although, as one Eastern Front official noted, even such a large contingent has not stopped GoS abuses of the peace agreement.[26] It is contended that there is no need for international forces because Eritrea has excellent knowledge of and intelligence on the region and is well placed to either right any wrongs, or bring them to the attention of Khartoum. It does, however, leave the Eastern Front dangerously dependent on the goodwill of the Eritreans. In informal discussions with Beja members of the Eastern Front there was considerable unhappiness about the lack of international engagement and oversight of the security arrangements.[27]

In the wake of the agreement Eastern Front combatants began moving to camps near Kassala and Aroma (north of Kassala) as a prelude to their integration into the SAF or other paramilitary forces, or demobilization. It is significant that the Beja and Rashida went to separate camps, thus providing another indication of the limitations of the integration achieved by the formation of the Eastern Front. However, unlike in the south, the insurgency in the east did not produce high levels of violence, the Eastern Front combatants were few in number, the area of conflict was largely restricted to the Eritrean frontier area, most civilians do not carry weapons (apart from swords and knives), there is little tribal animosity, and the parties to the agreement appear confident that the area can be quickly pacified. Since poverty and lack of development fuelled the conflict the biggest concern in this regard is that former combatants should receive either sufficient compensation or training. Although not referred to in the ESPA, it is now expected that UNMIS might

play a supportive role in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration.[28]

Under the power-sharing agreement the Eastern Front will be granted deputy governorships in Kassala and Gedaref states and ten seats in the legislatures of each of the three eastern states (arts. 16 and 17). Because of a prior agreement between the NCP and the DUP to grant the latter the deputy governorship of Red Sea state, the Eastern Front will acquire a ministerial position in the cabinet. The Eastern Front will also be given positions as advisers in each of the three states. The ten legislative positions granted to the Front strengthen the non-NCP component, which will now make up 50 per cent of the total. However, the opposition parties have not demonstrated much unity to date and, crucially, the security services will remain completely under the control of the NCP. The Eastern Front was granted one state ministerial position, an assistant to the president to be selected by the president from a list of nominees provided by the Front, an adviser to the president, and eight seats in the national assembly (arts. 8 and 9). Crucially, however, these seats will not affect NCP dominance of the assembly, which will be maintained at 52 per cent.

The Eastern Front's demand that the east be recognized as a region and that power be devolved to it (as was also argued by the SPLM/A and the Darfur rebels in their respective areas) was rejected by the government. In response, however, the three states of the east will set up an Eastern Sudan States' Coordinating Council to 'enhance coordination and cooperation between them'. Moreover, the GoS agreed to convene a conference by the end of 2007 to examine the administrative structure of the country (art. 5), a provision that the Eastern Front said would involve consideration of whether federalism is best pursued by devolving power to states and regions.[29] While some contend that the willingness of the NCP to negotiate with the Eastern Front represents the first occasion that a national government has recognized the region, most of those interviewed were not happy with the provisions of the agreement.[30] Nor did the Eastern Front achieve its demands on protecting the culture and language of the people of the east, probably because such an agreement would challenge the NCP's commitment to the Arabic language, its interpretation of Islam, and riverine cultural dominance in the country. The earlier related demand of the Eastern Front that self-determination in the east be considered during the negotiations was quietly dropped.

A crucial element of the agreement is the establishment of the Eastern Sudan Reconstruction and Development Fund (ESRDF) of USD 600 million over four years that 'shall serve as a principal organ in the planning, monitoring and follow up of the reconstruction and development program' (art. 23), language that is vague and gives rise to concerns that it will become a major vehicle for patronage. Moreover, the Board of the ESRDF will be chaired by the NCP minister of finance and the majority of its members will come from the NCP (art. 23).

Although there are references in the agreement to the need for equitable development in the east, the Development Fund is the only substantive provision to pursue this objective. In a region that suffers from enormous poverty and high unemployment, particularly in the heavily populated shanty towns surrounding Port Sudan, it is not surprising that many complain that in reality the peace agreement offers little, and that that it should have emphasized the needs of the eastern population—given their marginalized status in Sudan.[31]

While the ESPA was warmly welcomed in the national media and the country's legislative assembly, many members of the Eastern Front negotiating team in Asmara were less than enthusiastic and only accepted it because they felt that they had little alternative. There were also concerns about how their constituency would view the agreement. There is no doubt that everyone supports the end to hostilities and a return to more normal patterns of life, and this was a major factor motivating Eastern Front acquiescence to the agreement, but it is also true that the final provisions are far less than the people of the east were told they could expect, particularly in terms of power-sharing. In informal discussions with ordinary citizens in Gedaref there was a widespread view that the agreement was a move in the right direction,[32] but in Port Sudan sentiments were distinctly more negative.[33] As a result, Eastern Front leaders realize that they need to convince their supporters that they reached the best possible deal and did not cave in to external pressures. The leaders are also painfully aware of the proven ability of the NCP to sow confusion, create and support alternative opposition groups, buy friends, and infiltrate party organs, and this could lead to disenchantment and even the

establishment of breakaway groups.[34]

Both Eritrean and Eastern Front officials emphasized the need to prepare for elections that could herald a real change of power.[35] They also spoke in terms of building alliances with likeminded forces in the country, notably the SPLM/A and the Darfur rebels.[36] Such alliances, however, appear problematic.

Although regional and national elections are stipulated in the CPA, neither the NCP nor the SPLM/A are showing much enthusiasm for them and it is by no means clear that the elections will either take place on schedule or be free and fair. These fears were repeatedly raised in meetings with ordinary citizens in the east and by Eastern Front officials. Numerous critics pointed out that the pursuit of political ends is not possible without democracy and that, even with lukewarm attempts to restrict the security regime in the east, there is no sign of a democratic transformation in Sudan.[37] However, even when these problems are acknowledged there is still strong agreement among members of the Eastern Front about the necessity of gearing up for a political struggle with the NCP in the hope that the ESPA has provided them with the security to return to their natural arena of party politics.

Nonetheless, there is recognition that the Eastern Front's struggle to overthrow the NCP has—at least for the immediate future—ended unsuccessfully. One senior Eastern Front leader said, 'By making this agreement we will probably extend the life of the government by a few years'.[38] This is in marked contrast to those, particularly in the international community, who contend that the regional peace agreements serve to weaken the NCP. Not only does the achievement of yet another peace agreement marginally increase the stature and legitimacy of the NCP, and demonstrate its responsiveness to international and SPLM/A pressures, it also significantly eases tensions with Eritrea and has permitted the transfer of troops from the east to Darfur.[39] The NCP, however, insists that it appreciates that it is has a reputation nationally and internationally for not keeping its promises, and repeatedly assured Eastern Front and the Eritrean mediators that it is fully committed to implementing the agreement.[40]

The Eritrean government was also a major beneficiary of the peace agreement. In the first instance the agreement to limit SAF numbers in the east and to disband SAF-aligned anti-PFDJ armed groups (notably the Abdella Idris-led ELF) improves Eritrea's security position along its western borders, which is important given its continuing military stand-off with Ethiopia. The opening of the Eritrea-Sudan border also effectively ends the country's encirclement and should ease economic pressures in the country.

The role of the Eritrean mediators in the eastern conflict was greatly appreciated by Khartoum as both countries share an aversion to the UN, the AU, or the US and its allies dominating the country's peace processes. As a result, days before the agreement was signed Major-General Salah Gosh, head of Sudan's powerful National Security Agency, flew to Asmara to hold talks about the possibility of Eritrea leading the next round of Darfur peace talks.[41] Thus the achievement of the eastern peace agreement initially appeared to enhance the prospects that Eritrea would lead the peace process in Darfur. This has subsequently become less likely, however, because Eritrean control over the Darfurian rebels has declined, in part because of their negative view of the ESPA.

VIII. Conclusion

The armed conflict that emerged in eastern Sudan is not unique. It shares marked similarities to conflicts in southern and western Sudan and like them it is a product of marginalization, uneven development, and the domination of the Sudanese state since independence by riverine-based elites. Moreover, it also bears comparison with conflicts elsewhere in the Horn of Africa where authoritarian governments seeking to control peripheral areas and impose alien cultural forms have provoked resistance (Markakis, 1994). In the absence of democratic institutions through which this domination could be challenged in the political arena, ethnic communities and regions have felt compelled to take up arms. Such has been the case with the BC and the Eastern Front, which would have preferred to engage Khartoum governments politically, but instead were compelled to conduct what has proven to be a less than successful insurgency.

While the SPLM/A and Darfur liberation movements initially took the form of armed groups and only much later developed political wings, the BC has a long political pedigree and only recently turned to armed struggle. However, the Eastern Front and its counterparts in the south and west of Sudan suffered from similar weaknesses: an unclear political programme and an underdeveloped ideology, weak organization and leadership, an inability to enact reforms in its liberated territories, and tenuous links with their support bases. Like those in the south and west, the rebel groups in the east looked to the international community to compensate for their weaknesses. Members of the international community frequently voiced sympathy for the plight of the inhabitants of eastern Sudan but, with the exception of Eritrea, did not go beyond verbal support. Unfortunately, being adjacent to the Red Sea and bordering Eritrea and Ethiopia, eastern Sudan could not expect to escape regional entanglements, particularly in the post-colonial era when the Horn has been in almost constant turmoil.

For most of the 45 years since the ELF launched an armed struggle on what was then the Sudanese-Ethiopian border, regimes in Khartoum, Addis Ababa, and later Asmara have supported one another's dissidents. The ESPA calls for an end to the support of such dissidents by Khartoum and Asmara, but it will be some time before it can be ascertained whether the commitment to that provision is sincere. Experience in the Horn is that even when governments stop supporting each other's dissidents, they do not disband them, understanding only too well how quickly conditions can change and that a friend of today can become an enemy of tomorrow—or vice versa. Moreover, given widespread allegations that the NCP has not followed through on its commitments under the CPA and the DPA, where it is confronting much stronger armed groups, there are bound to be doubts as to its sincerity in implementing the ESPA.

No doubt the Eastern Front leaders share these concerns, but they have never felt comfortable in the role of guerrilla fighters. Unlike the Darfurian rebels, the BC is a political party and its leadership, and even more of its membership, want to pursue their objectives in the political arena. With all its inadequacies, they now feel they have an agreement that will permit them to do just that. Only time will tell whether that assessment will prove correct but the prognosis cannot be optimistic. As this analysis has made clear the ESPA was largely a by-product of a larger process of reconciling the governments of Eritrea and Sudan and reconfiguring the security architecture of the Horn. Process and rhetoric were emphasized, and legitimacy was conferred on the agreement by the governments of the two countries—and less enthusiastically by the international community, which appears to accept that another conflict in Sudan has been resolved. In fact the only thing resolved is that the violence associated with a low-level insurgency has ended. There is little evidence to show that marginalization—the condition that led the components of the Eastern Front to launch their armed struggle—will end. After an examination of the outcomes of peace processes in Central America, Alejandro Bendana concludes that the weak and disenfranchised majority frequently gains little and often loses significantly from international engagement that has the effect of suppressing conflict but not addressing, much less overcoming, the social injustices that produce the insurrections in the first place (Bendana, 2003). This appears to be an apt summation of the ESPA.

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Endnotes

1 Author interview with Dr Ghazi Salahdien, 22 April 2002.

2 Author interview with Eastern Front leader, Gedaref, 26 November 2006.

3 Correspondence with Sara Pantuliano, 21 December 2006.

4 Statement by Mustafa Said Khalil, Minister of Health, Gedaref, 26 November 2006.

5 See reported cases at <http://www.cpmtsudan.org>.

6 Khartoum justified the seizure by accusing the Rashaida of smuggling. The government was also alarmed at their close ties with the regime in Eritrea (the tribe lives on both sides of the border) at a time when relations between Khartoum and Asmara were very tense.

7 See the reports at <http://www.cmptsudan.org>.

8 Author interview with Eastern Front official, Asmara, 5 October 2006.

9 Author interview with Eastern Front official, Khartoum, 3 May 2006.

10 Author interview with Eastern Front official, Khartoum, 3 May 2006.

11 Author interview with Eastern Front official, Khartoum, 3 May 2006.

12 Later, the Eastern Front drew on the external leadership of the BC to participate in the peace negotiations in Asmara.

13 Another indicator of its weak performance is that, although there is no doubting the disaffection among Beja youth, the fighting ranks of the BC have never been large, even after the demonstrations and shootings in Port Sudan in December 2005. It would appear that while many Beja youth crossed the border to Eritrea and joined the BC, they soon left again for reasons that cannot be determined, but which clearly reflect negatively on the military leadership.

14 Author interview with Eastern Front official, Port Sudan, 4 December 2006.

15 Author interview with medical doctor, Khartoum, 29 May 2006.

16 Author interview with Eastern Front Officials, Port Sudan, 29 November 2006.

17 Discussion group, Beja Club, Port Sudan, 30 November 2006.

18 Author interview with Beja Congress officials, Gedaref, 25–26 May 2006.

19 Author interviews with Eastern Front officials, Gedaref, 27–28 November 2006; and Port Sudan, 30 November 2006.

20 Ghazi Salahdien, Presidential Adviser, Khartoum, 28 August 2006.

21 There is reason not to fully endorse this view since the NCP went to considerable lengths to undermine the Eastern Front, including the establishment of an alternative opposition party, but ultimately they were not entirely successful and the ruling party had little option but to deal with the Front. That said, Khartoum appreciated that any peace agreement could not be implemented without an end to the tense relations between Khartoum and Asmara.

22 Author interview with Eritrean Government official, Khartoum, 18 November 2006.

23 Author interview with Eritrean official, Asmara, 8 October 2006.

24 Author interview with Former Beja official, Port Sudan, 1 December 2006.

25 Author interview with Eastern Front official, Asmara, 7 October 2006.

26 Author interview with Mohamed Ibrahim, Eastern Front Official, Gedaref, 25 November 2006.
27 Discussion group, Beja Club, Port Sudan, 30 November 2006.
28 Author interview with UNMIS official, Khartoum, 18 January 2006.
29 Author interview with Amna Dirar, vice-chairman and leader of the internal wing of the BC, Asmara, 2 October 2006.
30 Discussion group, Beja Club, Port Sudan, 30 November 2006.
31 Discussion group, Beja Club, Port Sudan, 30 November 2006.
32 Discussion groups, Teachers' Club, Gedaref, 24–25 November 2006.
33 Discussion group, Beja Club, Port Sudan, 30 November 2006.
34 Author interview with Eastern Front official, Asmara, 4 October 2006.
35 Author interview with Eritrean official, Asmara, 5 October 2006; interview with Eastern Front Chairman Musa Mohammed Ahmed, Asmara, 10 October 2006.
36 Author interview with Eritrean official, Khartoum, 18 November 2006; interview with Eastern Front official, Gedaref, 28 November 2006.
37 Discussion group, Beja Club, Port Sudan, 30 November 2006.
38 Author interview with an Eastern Front leader, Asmara, 2 October 2006
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40 Author interview with Eritrean government official, Khartoum, 18 October 2006.
41 Author interview with Eastern Front official, Asmara, 10 October 2006.

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